

Global Resonance of Micro-Narratives: How Chinese Short Dramas Open Doors to the American Market—A Dual Logic of Cultural Deconstruction and Technological Empowerment

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Abstract:

In recent years, Chinese short dramas have achieved remarkable success in global markets, demonstrating particularly strong competitiveness in the American market. This paper challenges the traditional cultural discount theory by analyzing the reasons behind the explosive popularity of Chinese short dramas in North America through a dual logic of cultural deconstruction and technological empowerment. It also provides recommendations for the overseas expansion of Chinese cultural products. The study found that the overseas success of Chinese short dramas stemmed from their industrialized production model and their distinctive features of low cost, lightweight format, and high emotional value. Crucially, the key to China's cultural exports did not lie in mere cultural transplantation but rather in achieving value co-creation through technological empowerment.

Keywords: Chinese short dramas; cultural export; technological empowerment; localization; cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

With the rapid overseas expansion of Chinese short dramas, a “short drama craze” has swept across the United States. Data from Diandian reveal that since April 2025, ReelShort has surpassed traditional international streaming giants such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and HBO in download figures for two consecutive months, albeit by a narrow margin. These data

reflect the distinctive appeal and substantial market potential of Chinese short dramas. For instance, the single-episode production *The Divorced Billionaire Heiress* was reported by the *Global Times* to have cost only \$200,000 to produce, yet it earned box office revenues of \$25 million. This striking disparity between cost and return highlights the remarkable commercial success of Chinese short dramas.

This paper investigates the success of Chinese short

dramas in the American market. While examining the underlying causes, it seeks to move beyond the traditional cultural discount framework by proposing a three-dimensional analytical model (Figure 1): localization adaptation—technological empowerment—value co-creation. This approach aims to enrich theoretical research in cross-cultural communication.

From a theoretical perspective, this study aims to enrich the cultural discount theory and offers insights for its further development. The concept was originally formulated to explain why certain domestically successful media products underperformed overseas [1] and was later systematized by Hoskyns and Millers [2]. It describes the diminished appeal of a media product when it is introduced

into a different cultural context, arising from audiences' difficulty identifying with the styles, values, beliefs, institutions, and behavioral patterns presented in the work [1]. From a practical perspective, this research proposes a "blockbuster methodology" for the global expansion of Chinese cultural products. Although China possesses abundant cultural resources, many such products face substantial challenges during internationalization [3]. The success of Chinese short dramas may offer transferable insights, clarifying how these works have evolved from initial "cultural curiosities" into "value carriers" that embody Chinese cultural values, thereby advancing the worldwide dissemination of Chinese culture.

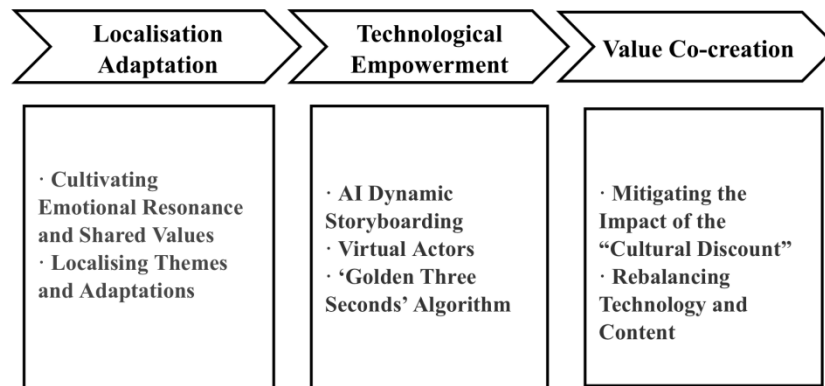


Fig. 1. Three-dimensional analytical model: "Localisation Adaptation – Technological Empowerment – Value Co-creation"

2. Current Development Status and Typical Models of Chinese Short Dramas in the United States

2.1 Market Performance and User Profiling

In 2024, Chinese short dramas generated US\$151 million in revenue in the American market, accounting for 64.8% of their total overseas income. These figures underscore the pivotal role of the United States in the global expansion of Chinese short dramas. In terms of user demographics, White women aged 45 and older emerged as the primary paying group, with a notable 50% payment rate. This profile informs content development and market promotion strategies.

Regarding platform competition, Chinese-backed applications performed strongly: eighteen platforms—including ReelShort and DramaBox—captured 90% of the overseas top-20 market share. Notably, AI-generated scripts accounted for more than 60% of the content on these platforms, indicating that extensive use of artificial intel-

ligence in scriptwriting has become a defining feature of China's short-drama industry.

2.2 Content Production and Business Models

Chinese short dramas have established industrialized production workflows, with AI-based script generation and virtual-actor technologies significantly increasing efficiency [5]. AI quickly generates massive amounts of scripts matching the market trend and viewers' preference, while virtual actors are free from constraints such as availability of actors and fees and can produce quickly and cheaply [5]. Commerually, Chinese short dramas use "freemium": the producers release the first five episodes for free so that viewers will watch them to get users familiar with watching short dramas, then they charge money for users to watch the remaining parts including plot turns. It succeeds in monetization by luring users to watch for free and forming viewing and engagement habits with stories. Advertising expenditure usually takes up about 70% of total expenditure, and huge expenditure is invested in contact to produce a sense of audience for short dramas to make

them reach a broader audience. Having clarified the marketplace and business model, this paper now clarifies the twin-logic drivers of the phenomenon.

3. Analysing Development Logic: Dual Drivers of Cultural Deconstruction and Technological Empowerment

3.1 Cultural Adaptation: Localisation Strategies to Bridge Differences

Cross-cultural psychology research by John Berry and Harry Triandis indicates that culture is an important context for psychology; it is impossible to understand human psychology without considering cultural background [6]. Accordingly, as they reform values, Chinese short dramas never need to export their culture. What they focus on are emotional parts of audiences and cultivating themes of satisfying pan-cultural sentiments [7]. For example, when the TV show *The President Falls for the White House Cleaner* became a hit, Chinese short dramas made audiences sympathize with the cleaner by showing class-crossover plot. These pan-culture sentiments reduce cultural differences and create common feelings for audiences from different cultural backgrounds [8].

At the thematic adaptation level, Chinese short dramas remain adherent to their ancient “conflict-driven openings + high-frequency plot-twists” formula. They translate Chinese-native tropes such as “heir-apparent inheritance wars” and “marriage before love” onto American-popular places—Wall Street or the White House—and combine Western ones such as vampires and werewolves. This adaptive way reduces the cultural difference barrier for audiences so that the American audiences can understand this better.

Either through thematic re-enactment or value creation, Chinese short dramas pave the way new directions to defeat the cultural discount theory and place Chinese culture in focus.

3.2 Technological Empowerment: Disruptive Innovation in Algorithms and Production

Chinese short dramas boost the filming efficiency by 300% with dynamic story-boarding with AI, and the cost per episode is reduced to about US\$50,000 with virtual-actor tech. At the distribution level, Chinese short dramas use TikTok’s “golden three seconds” algorithm to release teasers. The algorithm matches user interests and delivers interesting clips within seconds after users open the app, enticingly prompting them to watch the whole episode and achieve intended engagement. Together, these technologies form a closed creation → distribution → back-talk → re-creation cycle, not only reducing costs and

maximizing productivity of distribution but also offering new creative choices for brief dramas.

3.3 Industrial Synergy: Creative Adaptation of Hollywood’s Ecosystem

Regarding talent attraction, China’s short-drama sector capitalized on opportunities during the Hollywood strikes. Daily rates for third-tier actors rose from \$300 to \$1,500, and this lucrative compensation attracted many Hollywood performers to participate in Chinese short-drama productions. Reports that even the casting director of *The Godfather* sought collaboration further underscored the sector’s growing appeal to Hollywood talent.

Regarding capacity relocation, more than thirty Chinese short-form drama producers have established operations in Los Angeles, and about 90% of Chinese film and television students in the United States have shifted toward the short-form sector. This redeployment of capacity, coupled with the influx of talent, is propelling localized production and development of Chinese short-form dramas in the United States and is fostering deeper exchange and integration between the Chinese and American screen industries. Having outlined the developmental logic of short-form dramas, this article now turns to the cultural-export paradox inherent in the phenomenon.

4. The Paradox of Cultural Exportation: Achievements and Challenges

4.1 The Potential for Soft Power Construction

Certain Chinese short dramas have demonstrated positive effects in cultural export. For instance, *Home and Away* utilized the Sichuan–Chongqing dialect and cultural symbols such as pot cakes to evoke overseas audiences’ memories of regional Chinese culture, thereby fostering regional identity. Similarly, *The Mystery of Majiayao: The Code of the Divine Staff* employed “technological archaeology” to reconstruct traditional culture, driving a 30% increase in visitor numbers to the Gansu Museum. These cases indicate that Chinese short dramas have the potential to disseminate Chinese culture and enhance China’s soft power.

Theoretically, Horskins’ cultural discount theory has undergone localized adaptation. Through technological empowerment—such as locally adapted themes and precise algorithmic recommendations—Chinese short dramas mitigate cultural barriers to acceptance, enabling Chinese culture to circulate overseas in more accessible forms.

4.2 Controversies and Challenges

However, the development of Chinese short dramas also faces persistent controversies and challenges. Content

homogenization remains a significant concern: while AI-generated scripts have improved efficiency, they have also contributed to an “all-dramas-look-alike” effect. This not only narrows opportunities for human actors and screenwriters but also intensifies debates over AI attribution. The U.S. Copyright Office and courts state that only human-created portions are eligible for protection [10], while the EU’s AI Act requires general models to disclose training-data summaries and comply with copyright law. With developing AI technology, Chinese micro-dramas are forced to deploy AI within legal and regulatory structures [11]. To do this, it is necessary to construct compliance mechanisms into emerging governance to offset possibilities of homogenization and infringement [12]. Concurrently, incidents of cultural misunderstanding still persist. media scold Chinese micro-dramas with “low-brow and vulgar” content. Reports inform that These dramas attract audiences with plots of “revenge” and “Cinderella overnight wealth”, and they are very inclined to believe in temporal things and materialism. Not only will it hinder the healthy development of Chinese culture, but it will also cause a misunderstanding among foreign audiences.

5. Future Path: From “Traffic Feast” to “Value Co-creation”

5.1 Thematic Innovation

As for the sustainable development, it is necessary to develop content for Chinese short dramas. For the production of vertical genres, it is advisable to try fewer models of men-centered stories such as sports dramas (eg, Puck Love) and historical dramas (eg, Journey Through the Middle Ages), so as to expand content diversity and meet different audience tastes.

“Export to Domestic”: To produce “Export to Domestic” dramas can promote the transfer of narrative expertise gained overseas to domestic markets and complete promotion worldwide, and also achieve mutually complementary co-growth between international and domestic markets.

5.2 Rebalancing Technology and Content

As for the policy guidance, it is necessary to perfect NRTA filing system and whitelist methods for the development of short dramas. It is possible to promote “short dramas + legal education” models and “traveling in short drama inspiration” models, which enable these works to complete commercial value completion while completing social value.

From the perspective of creative innovation, it is necessary to have an AI originated and human curated model. For example, Xing’anling Ghost Stories unites Northeast

Chinese mythology and ghost stories in a perfect match, technology meets culture, and human intelligence meets cultural sensitivity. By using AI in creative production, we can avoid losing control over human hands that may cause content valuation failure.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Key Findings

Due to the success of Chinese short dramas in the global market, we can identify good content with high-low cost of decision-making and penetrative technology exist. In short, successful cultural export does not rely on the simple “cultural transplantation” but on the promotion of “value co-creation” by technological enablement.

6.2 Policy Recommendations or Management Suggestions

To gain a stronger foothold in the foreign market for short dramas, policy should consider the following aspects: (i) policy support and guidance, such as dubbing and translation incentive, export-revenue reward etc; (ii) simplification of copyright protection system, including the simplification of standardized content registration and the development of industry norms for access to a legal remedy; (iii) encouragement of end to end value chain development, including upstream-downstream coordination and deepened division of labor; and the establishment of a national data base for cultural export; (iv) encouragement of technological innovation and application; and (v) enhancement of international cooperation and exchange.

6.3 Future Outlook

In fact, if Chinese short dramas could outrun thematic innovation, technical and even ethical control, it would be able to pass over the short term profit sensing pattern and build a sustainable long term pattern for industry development. Scholarly, if we could watch closely, the development of Chinese short dramas is an interesting case to watch the digital spread of culture, media globalization and value-cultural production. It not only enriches the theory of communication science and film studies, but also offers a good explanation of model and route of cultural participation of China.

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